

The sun was rising in the sky behind the spirit. An open field of dry grasses and occasional trees with limbs outstretched towards the sky surrounded him, soaked in continuously brighter yellow light. With a heaving sigh, the spirit laid his paw on the ground. He took a deep breath, held it, and emptied his mind of all but the power of his light.

Light poured into the land in bands and seemed to crawl outwards from the soil. It wrapped around itself and seemed to gravitate into a larger mass in front of the spirit's bent head. The threads of light coalesced into a pool, slowly taking a physical shape covering the ground in front of the spirit.

Then, a flash of blinding light erupted from where the light was, and the spirit fell to the ground with a yelp, covering his eyes. As he slowly squinted them open once more, massaging behind his short, wispy as he did so, he saw that the presence of light he had created had vanished.

The spirit returned to a sitting position, buried his head in his paws, and let out a rough yell resonating with unrestrained frustration.

It echoed through the empty savannah in a way he wasn't used to. He stood up, ice-cold blood filling his veins. The sound of his own paws crunching the dry grass almost made him jump.

Once he realized those weren't the sound of his paws, he did jump.

"Woah there, spring-loaded. Are you alright?"

The spirit turned around to see a short, wily-looking figure with long, wide ears resembling a rabbit's. They extended at acute angles from her head and drooped lightly over her head.

"I'm fine, I just - I -" he sputtered to explain, doing his best to mitigate his embarrassment.

"Whatever you were doing, you had me concerned you were being eaten alive."

"Well, I'm not," he retorted bluntly, almost cutting her sentence off.

"I can see that," she agreed, a hint of annoyance streaming into her voice, "but you certainly don't sound alright. What are you doing out here?"

"Practicing."

"It looked like you were tearing light straight out of the earth."

"It was- wait, you were *watching*?" he asked fervently, leaning his head towards her.

"Hey, no need to get testy with me. I was scouting a place to play some relayball and saw what looked like a second sun flash in the distance. I ran as fast as I could to get here, all for you to be screaming at an empty patch of dirt," she explained matter-of-factly.

"I... suppose you wouldn't know if you weren't from Hoa."

"I'm not oblivious to what the spirits of Hoa can do, but it usually doesn't look like lightning striking from a blue sky."

"Yeah, I get it. I'm sorry to cause you trouble," he apologized, his voice harsh and somewhat ingenuine. She didn't seem to take offense.

"That's no problem, though I still want to know *what* you were practicing. And who you are."

"I'm Pamo, and..." he hesitated.

"You look embarrassed."

"Well aren't *you* intuitive," Pamo shot back.

"Whatever it is, it can't possibly matter to me enough to cause you any worry," she asserted. Her voice was blunt but Pamo thought he could hear an undertone of genuine forgiveness. He took a deep breath and continued.

"Spirits of Hoa can focus light into solid objects. They can make bridges, ladders, sculptures, anything physical appear out of thin air."

"And you chose to summon a flash of light?" she interjected. Pamo sighed curtly and kept talking.

"At least, they're supposed to be able to. The most I can make is an obnoxious puddle before it shatters back into pure light and makes that awful distraction you saw."

"So that was not the intended result?"

"Nearly blinding myself and making the local guardian spirits think I'd been torn to shreds was not the intended result, no," Pamo sarcastically clarified.

"That's good," she responded, seemingly not reading Pamo's facetiousness.

"Is that all you needed to know?" Pamo asked with no subtle amount of irritation. She nodded. Pamo sighed once more, this time deeply, and rubbed his eyes with his paws.

"You know, this reminds me of when I was learning carpentry."

"Of course it does," Pamo responded as he looked back up at her. "Look, I'm glad you know how not to cut off your paw with a chisel, but--"

"Oh, I nearly did. I was awful at it."

Pamo's words were suddenly held up in his mouth. He lowered his paws to his sides and looked at her with genuine curiosity.

"What did you say?" he asked, cynicism vanishing from his voice.

"I spent season after season carving countless pieces, doing my best to follow the specifications, and either trashing the wood or injuring myself. Every time, I'd get angry at myself for failing. Every time, I'd hurl the misshapen wood to the ground or burn it in my next campfire," she continued explaining. Pamo desperately tried to parse his mind into words.

"How many seasons? How long ago?"

"I was quite a few cycles younger when I started carpentry, though as to when I got any better, I couldn't say. There wasn't one day when I was suddenly pleased with the work I made. To be honest, I'm still not. I still want to improve," she admitted.

"But you don't burn everything you make," Pamo inferred.

"Of course not. They're important for construction now, but there was a long time when I couldn't make anything worthy of being used," she recalled, a kind of nostalgic sadness in her voice. "I felt completely inadequate, like everyone else was useful while I was just wasting my time."

"How long did it take you before you could make something worth using?"

"I don't remember, and it doesn't matter anyway. Improvement doesn't obey a time limit."

"What do you mean?"

"Some things, you can learn to do in a day. Others take a lifetime. What's difficult and what's easy changes depending on who you are, and it can change over time just like your taste in food."

"So what, I'm just supposed to keep failing?" Pamo asked with resignation.

"Yes. It'll hurt every time you do, but don't get angry at yourself. You won't get there any faster by wishing you were better or comparing yourself to others. All you can do is continue trying."

Pamo tried to ask another question, but he hesitated. She tilted her head in slight confusion and took on a sympathetic frown.

"I know it doesn't seem very helpful, but I promise you that's how it works," she clarified apologetically. "There's no easy way out."

"I get the idea, but what about the rest of Hoa? I know that you don't understand what it's like, but people expect things of you there."

"As if Kainar doesn't expect things of their spirits?" she laughed. "We're the ones who maintain Korios City!"

"That's not what I meant. In Hoa, I'm supposed to be part of their harmony. I'm supposed to be able to read their poems just so, respect nature with my every waking breath, and make the art they want to see appear out of thin air. I can't do that if I can't summon the light," he explained.

She nodded in understanding, relenting on her previous argument. She looked out towards the top branches of Kainar's spirit tree visible in the distance and smiled.

"Well, you're not in Hoa right now. I suggest you take a break and see if there's anything in Kainar you like doing more than being angry with the ground," she plainly continued. "You could try to learn woodworking instead - Korios City has many good carpenters who offer cheap beginner lessons."

"I... will, thank you, but I didn't think Kainar cared for spirits from Hoa."

"Only the ones that act like they're better than us," she giggled. Pamo nodded his head to the side in reluctant agreement.

"I know the feeling," he sighed.

She extended a hand towards Pamo to shake. He took it and did his best rendition of a handshake, at which she smiled.

"I'm Saki, from Korios City. I've got some friends expecting a game of relayball about now, but I expect to see you around."

“Thanks for the sage advice, even if I’d never hear the end of it if the rest of Hoa’s spirits knew I took advice from a guardian of Kainar,” Pamo admitted.

“They would do that,” Saki agreed with a cautionary tone. Pamo sighed.

“I swear they don’t mean poorly. It’s just that they don’t know anything except victory, harmony, and elaborate tea recipes,” Pamo snarked.

“I know. Someday, they’ll learn. I just wish that day came before the day they came to Kainar.”

Pamo laughed and nodded once more.

“Well, best wishes. Try not to get eaten,” Saki spoke with a smile. She turned back towards Korios City and began a long sprint home, waving a paw back towards Pamo as she did. Pamo waved once in response.

He lowered his paw and stood without moving for a moment. He looked down at the burnt patch of grass he’d attempted to summon the light in, lightly kicking it with one of his small lower hooves.

Pamo curtly laughed at his past self, turned back towards the Hoa spirit camp in Kainar, and leapt into a dash towards it.